
Les Immatériaux Research

Working Papers

les-immateriaux.net

Working Paper No. 6

Jean-François Lyotard

On a Collaboration

D'un travail (1986)

Published 1 January 2021

Teamwork

Editorial note

The text by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard presented here, 'D'un travail', offers a personal insight into the complex working process that led to the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*. This exhibition was presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in the spring of 1985 and was curated by Lyotard together with the design theoretician Thierry Chaput, on commission by the Centre Pompidou's department for design research, the Centre de Création Industrielle (cci).

We don't know at this moment about the exact circumstances of how this text came about, but it is possible that it was compiled from remarks and notes that Lyotard made on occasions marking the completion of an endeavour that, for Chaput and some other team members, had already been in the making for over three years, starting in the autumn of 1981. Lyotard himself joined the project in the summer of 1983 and worked intensively, for one and a half years, with the core team of project managers at the cci, Martine Moinot, Chantal Noël, Catherine Testanière, Nicole Toutcheff, and Sabine Vigoureux. These five, together with Chaput and Lyotard himself, are the "seven heads" that Lyotard refers to at the beginning of his text.

This "mind of seven heads" (*esprit à sept têtes*) was surrounded by a host of other collaborators, some of whom should be mentioned here as further members of the extended team, including the scenographers and architects, Philippe Délis and Katia Lafitte, the administrator Dominique Barillé, and the people in charge of the technical production, especially Martine Castro, Gerard Chiron, Annyck Graton, and Françoise Michel. The suite of catalogues, which Lyotard attended to in particular, was edited by Chantal Noël with the assistance of Elisabeth Gad, typescripts were prepared by Véronique Guillaume, the design was done by Luc Mailliet of the Grafibus design agency, and the catalogue printing and production was supervised by Jacky Pouplard.

The "Chronology of *Les Immatériaux*" (Working Paper #1) documents many of the meetings that Lyotard had with these people, talking about matters that immediately impacted the conceptual realisation of the ambitious exhibition project. Similarly, appointments with Catherine Counot, from the Bibliothèque Publique d'Information, and Bernard Blistène, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, not only served to practically coordinate the cooperation with the other departments of the Centre Pompidou. These were curatorial encounters that formed part of an extended, ongoing, collective conversation about individual projects as well as about the exhibition as a whole, and about its conception as it evolved throughout 1984. We can presume that, in writing the following text, Lyotard was also thinking about this extended group of people, as well as about the external advisors, scientists, artists, and contributors, many of whom are listed on the credits page of the first volume of the exhibition catalogue, *Épreuves d'écriture*. But the core team that Lyotard refers to as the *esprit à sept têtes* is the group that we here see in a snapshot taken during a Christmas party in December 1984. (Several of them participated in a conversation about *Les Immatériaux*, documented in *Modernes, et après?*, ed. by Élie Théofilakis, 1985, p. 15–20, and to the "Post-scriptum" of the catalogue volume, *Épreuves d'écriture*, 1985, p. 259–263.)



Fig. 1
The team of *Les Immatériaux*,
December 1984 (left to right,
front: Thierry Chaput, Chantal Noël,
Martine Moinot, Nicole Toutcheff;
back: Marc Girard [CCI],
Sabine Vigoureux, Jean-François
Lyotard, Jean Dethier [CCI]
as Père Noël, Elisabeth Gad,
Catherine Testanière).
Private collection.

Lyotard's text, 'D'un travail', was originally published in 1986, in a volume that comprised essays by several authors about the exhibition and its audience: *Les Immatériaux au Centre G. Pompidou en 1985. Étude de l'évènement exposition et de son public*, edited by Christian Carrier for EXPO MEDIA. This volume also included Nathalie Heinich's seminal sociological study on the audience responses to *Les Immatériaux*. It is remarkable that Lyotard himself contributed not a reflection on the visitors and their experience in the exhibition, but a text that focused solely on the people involved in its preparation and production. – The French version of this text is here made available again, 35 years after its original publication, accompanied for the first time by an English translation.

I'd like to express my gratitude to Robin Mackay for his crucial contribution to the translation from the French, to Dolorès Lyotard for generously granting the permission to publish this important document, and to the association *les jardins des pilotes* for their support of this publication in the design of Tristan Mailet.

Andreas Broeckmann
Berlin, December 2020

On a Collaboration

Jean-François Lyotard

I would just like to talk about the work of the *Immatériaux* team. Which wasn't a team—I mean, a combination of skills with a functional purpose, along with an organizational distribution of tasks, in full possession of a concept of its object. It was more like a mind with seven heads elaborating the anamnesis of its themes: material, art, science and matter, body, space-time, and what 'to exhibit' means. If the team was 'successful', it's because this work of inquietude and cooperation was underway within it for two years, non-stop, both in and out of hours. This meant abandoning all professional strictures and power games between us, along with the associated hierarchical deference and resentments; but above all it meant listening carefully to one another's sensibilities, to whatever, through one or the other of us, daunted and confused as we may have been, promised to make some headway as regards the Idea of the exhibition. That secret emotion when one of us brought to a meeting (as one brings a dream to the analyst) some new idea, some principle of exploration, a way of arranging things, a sketch for one of the sites or the discovery of some pertinent object. It could be a detail or an overall idea, since no one was particularly responsible for the thing as a whole. We were certainly a very efficient team, and what needed to get done got done. That's how it was as far as skills, intelligence, and willpower goes. But the real preparation takes place first and foremost in the field of sentiment, in search of lost time—I mean the world in which we live. This anamnesis demanded by the exhibition in return made it seem like a friend to you, unbearable to others, undecidable in the eyes of most.

But we should take this observation on the work further. It was only from outside that it looked like social work or culture industry work. Yes, we certainly worked! But the secret of the exhibition is that it worked on us. Each one of us differently, singularly, but it worked on us all. It worked on us as a horizon works on the navigator, or as words as yet unwritten work on the writer. In any case, it was far more our master than it was ever our dependent. At least if master or mistress is a name for one who doesn't just turn a profit from body and mind, but works on the soul so as to draw out of it things it didn't know it could do.

Claude Simon said the essential in an interview with Michel Enaudeau*. He was asked, in Moscow, I think: How do you understand the profession of writer? He replied that it consists in trying to start a sentence, continue it, and finish it. For us, the exhibition was the difficulty of this sentence, and the horizon of words, of sites, lighting, and colours that called it forth. (Such was our presumption, that it was calling us.) An indeterminate form, conceptually elusive, towards which only sentiment, when interrogated, spied upon (this is the anamnesis), purged, cleansed of interests fantastic and otherwise, can lead the way, by revealing which means will fail to translate it. A singular fidelity, a probity in regard to something indeterminate.

So, as you can see, when I talk about this 'work' I am talking about the impalpable. The rest is for the public. They will be the judges, that's the rule. I am obviously not trying to explain the exhibition here, to excuse it, or to influence that public judgment. Nor am I trying to provide future curators with a reliable recipe for collective work. I'm just searching myself. It has always seemed to me that I missed something essential when I tried to answer questions. What did you want to say? What did you, old philosopher, learn from *Les Immatériaux*? Why did you make an exhibition (instead of a book)? (As if I had just turned up with my briefcase full of concepts, and asked the young people to transcribe them into this other medium, the space of the *grande galerie*...).

The interrogation, interview, debate, press conference, is not conducive to serious recollection. Now that the exhibition is no longer on, I myself, someone who is not a professional, who is lucky enough not to have to 'capitalize on the experience' of *Les Immatériaux*, and who is happy to no longer have to think about it (to suffer from it), I try to remember the most important aspect, that which remains hidden. I do think it was a singular way of working with men and women who are far younger than me.

What binds the writer to a book he has written is the pain it cost him. The same goes for a teacher and a course he has taught. Not institutional success, not perfection in itself. Sometimes the course is mediocre, sometimes the book is flawed. That pain was a pain of relinquishment, of enforced humility, of dependency and revolt against dependency, and a forcing beyond what seemed immovable.

If I were imprudent, or even completely foolish, I would add: proof that the most secret work can be hidden within the thin, tightly meshed fabric of the culture industry. What we owe to 'culture' is not what it expects of us, but this work, this perlaboration. For this work bears upon 'culture' itself (our 'subjects', science, the body, materials, the exhibition...). And in that sense, it works on everyone, proprietors, custodians, and users of culture. Whether they know it or not.

Forgive me for having said what I wanted to say in such a serious, edifying manner. At the present moment I seem to have lost my ability to be humorous and easygoing. Thank you for your work.

Translation from the French by Robin Mackay and Andreas Broeckmann.

Originally published as 'D'un travail' in *Les Immatériaux au Centre G. Pompidou en 1985. Étude de l'évènement exposition et de son public*. Ed. Christian Carrier. EXPO MEDIA, Paris, 1986, p. 147–149.

* In the original publication, this name was misspelled as "Evrandeau". Michel Enaudeau interviewed Claude Simon in Salses near

Perpignan, for the TF1 television station in the autumn of 1985, when Simon received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

D'un travail

Jean-François Lyotard

Je voudrais juste parler du travail de l'équipe des « Immatériaux ». Ce ne fut pas une équipe. Je veux dire : association de compétences à finalité fonctionnelle, avec distribution organographique des tâches, en possession de concept de son objet. Plutôt un esprit à sept têtes élaborant l'anamnèse de ses thèmes : matériau, l'art, la science et la matière, corps, espace-temps, ce qu'est exposer. Si l'équipe a été « performante », c'est que ce travail d'inquiétude et d'association s'est fait en elle pendant deux ans sans arrêt, en séance et hors séance. Cela voulait dire entre nous l'abandon des enfermements professionnels, des volontés de puissance, des déférences hiérarchiques et des ressentiments associés, mais surtout l'écoute probe des sensibilités, de ce qui à travers l'un ou l'autre, intimidé, confus, faisait chemin quant à l'Idée de l'exposition. L'émotion secrète quand tel d'entre nous apportait à la réunion (comme on apporte un rêve à l'analyste) une idée, un principe de prospection, de disposition, l'ébauche d'un site, la découverte d'un objet pertinent. Détail ou ensemble, personne n'étant en particulier affecté à la généralité. Nous étions certes une équipe tout à fait efficace, et ce qui devait être fait le fut. Cela dans l'ordre de la compétence, de l'intelligence et de la volonté. Mais la préparation est d'abord bien dans le champ du sentiment, à la recherche du temps perdu, je veux dire le monde où nous vivons. Cette anamnèse commandée par l'exposition a en retour rendu celle-ci aimable avec vous, insupportable aux autres, indécidable aux yeux de la plupart.

Il faudrait pousser plus avant cette observation sur le travail. Il ne fut un travail social, travail dans l'industrie culturelle, que de dehors. Ah, oui, on a travaillé ! Mais le secret de l'exposition, c'est qu'elle nous a travaillés. Chacun différemment, singulièrement, mais tous. Elle nous travaillait comme un horizon travaille le navigateur, ou ce qui n'est pas écrit, l'écrivain. Et de toute façon elle nous a maîtrisés bien plus que nous ne l'avons jamais eue sous notre dépendance. Du moins si maître ou maîtresse est le nom qui désigne ce qui ne fait pas seulement travailler la rentabilité du corps et de l'esprit, mais qui travaille l'âme de façon à obtenir d'elle ce qu'elle ne savait pas pouvoir.

Claude Simon a dit l'essentiel dans un entretien avec Michel Enaudeau*. On lui demandait, à Moscou, je crois : comment entendez-vous le métier d'écrivain ? C'est, répondit-il, de s'efforcer de commencer une phrase, de la continuer, et de la finir. L'exposition fut pour nous la difficulté de cette phrase, l'horizon de mots, de sites, lumières, couleurs qui appelait à la faire être. (Notre présomption, de supposer qu'elle nous appelait.) Une forme indéterminée, insaisissable par concept, vers laquelle le sentiment seul, s'il est interrogé, épié, (c'est l'anamnèse), apuré, nettoyé des intérêts fantastiques et autres, peut guider en faisant discerner les moyens qui ne la traduiront pas. Singulière fidélité, probité à l'endroit de quelque chose qui n'est pas déterminé.

Vous voyez qu'avec « travail » je parle de l'impalpable. Le reste est au public. Qu'il juge, c'est la règle. Je ne parle évidemment pas en vue d'expliquer l'exposition, de l'excuser, d'influencer ce jugement. Ni non plus de donner aux commissaires futurs une bonne recette de travail collectif. Je m'interroge seulement. Il m'a toujours semblé avoir manqué l'essentiel quand j'essayais de répondre aux questions. Qu'avez-vous voulu dire ? Qu'est-ce que vous, vieux philosophe, avez-vous appris avec les Immatériaux ? Pourquoi avez-vous fait une exposition (au lieu d'un livre ?) (comme si j'étais arrivé avec mon attaché case de concepts, et prière aux jeunes de les transcrire sur cet autre support, l'espace de la grande galerie ...)

L'interrogatoire, entretien, débat, conférence de presse, n'est pas propice à une remémoration sévère. Aujourd'hui que cette exposition n'a plus lieu, moi qui ne suis pas un professionnel, qui ai la chance de n'avoir pas à « capitaliser l'expérience » des Immatériaux, qui me réjouis de n'avoir plus à y penser (à en souffrir) j'essaie de me rappeler l'important, ce qui reste caché. Je crois bien que c'est un mode singulier de travail en compagnie d'hommes et de femmes, plus jeunes que moi de beaucoup.

L'écrivain, dans un livre qu'il a fait, ce qui l'attache, c'est le mal qu'il lui a donné. Et le professeur dans une classe qu'il a instruite. Pas le succès institutionnel, pas la perfection en soi. Quelquefois la classe est médiocre, le livre bancal. Ce mal, c'était le désaisissement, une humilité obligée, dépendance et révolte contre la dépendance, et le forçage par delà ce qu'on croyait assuré.

Si j'étais imprudent, voire tout à fait sot, j'ajouterais : preuve que dans le tissu maigre et serré de l'industrie culturelle peut se tramer le travail le plus secret. De ce que nous devons à la « culture », ce n'est pas ce qu'elle attend mais ce travail, cette perlaboration. Car celle-ci porte sur « la culture » elle-même (nos « sujets », science, corps, matériau, exposition...). Par où ce travail tout le monde, propriétaires, dépositaires, usagers de la culture. Quoi qu'ils en aient.

Excusez-moi d'avoir dit ce que je voulais dire sur un mode grave, édifiant. Le talent me manque en ce moment pour le drôle et le bon enfant. Merci pour votre travail.

de: *Les Immatériaux au Centre G. Pompidou en 1985. Étude de l'évènement exposition et de son public.* Ed. Christian Carrier. EXPO MEDIA, Paris, 1986, p. 147-149.

* Dans la publication originale, l'orthographe de ce nom était erronée « Evrandeau ». Michel Enaudeau a interviewé Claude Simon

à Salses, près de Perpignan, pour TF1 à l'automne 1985, lorsque ce dernier a reçu le prix Nobel de littérature.